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SPOTLIGHTING FEDERAL GRANTS #2

THE NATIONAL STUDENT EDUCATIONAL FUND

INTRODUCTION

At 20th and P near Washington's Dupont Circle the tax-exempt National Student Educational Fund (NSEF), its lobbying counterpart the U.S. Student Association (USSA) and nearly two dozen other leftist and feminist groups house themselves in an aging gray structure known simply as the "Headquarters Building." Several of the federally-funded groups have participated in the affairs of the others, and some have shared offices and telephones, employed the same staff members and shuffled student interns back and forth. NSEF is the recipient of Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) Grant #G0080-06374 from the U.S. Department of Education, which has provided over \$232,000 during the past two years to "promote educational equity." Well over half the annual budget pays the salaries of NSEF President Kathleen Downey, the project's full-time director (\$17,050 per year), two field coordinators and a secretary (\$15,500 each) and a part-time assistant director (\$8,250).

What is the taxpayer getting for his money? It is a question which should be asked routinely, yet seldom is. That the sums involved are not enormous, compared to many federal budget items, does not reduce the need for accountability. When the spotlight of scrutiny is turned on NSEF, it is clear that its salaried staff simply duplicate efforts of other feminist groups and WEEA grantees, exceed the subject matter intended for WEEA grants and use the project's resources to assure themselves continued federal funding.

Across Dupont Circle at 18th and R resides the Project for the Status and Education of Women (PSEW). Several long-time associates of PSEW comprise the self-styled "network" of WEEA grantees. PSEW's past associate director now heads the WEEA-funded Health Equity Project, formerly headquartered under another

name with NSEF at 20th and P, and a former PSEW staff assistant now works for the WEEA-funded Organization of Chinese American Women. PSEW itself receives WEEA Grant #G0079-01070, a one-year \$25,000 item, also to promote educational equity.

"EMPOWERING WOMEN"

The main products of NSEF's WEEA grant have been a 1981 national feminist conference in Washington and an accompanying manual, "Empowering Women," published jointly with USSA. Such national feminist conferences are quite common; the NSEF newsletter which first advertised the gathering listed it as the thirteenth of eighteen conferences in various parts of the country within a six-month period. The WEEA-funded conference preceded another NSEF national conference in Washington by less than two weeks. None of the other conferences received WEEA funds.

What unique contribution was made by the WEEA conference remains unclear even after speaking with its most enthusiastic participants. Julie Fleming-Huck, who attended from Wisconsin, initially termed the conference "outstanding," but when pressed for details could state only that the gathering "encouraged us to set goals." How did it do that? "By showing us how to plan." How does one plan? "By sitting around in groups and brainstorming." When questioned about the need for a national conference to teach this, Fleming-Huck conceded that she had attended so many other women's meetings that she could think of nothing special about this one.

The manual "Empowering Women" contains 257 pages of text purportedly related to educational equity, although over half the book discusses other matters. The manual is a glaring example of the duplication of effort typical of the many WEEA grants scattered among overlapping organizations. Of the 124 pages somewhat related to educational equity, two-thirds are little more than recycled PSEW publications, most of which were produced and distributed under PSEW's WEEA grant. What need the NSEF manual serves is unclear, for the PSEW-derived articles all appear on a single PSEW publications list, available free of charge. Six other pages in the manual reproduce work of the Women's Equity Action League, another WEEA grantee.

Where "Empowering Women" does not reproduce WEEA-funded work of NSEF's friends, it goes far beyond the subject of educational equity. The restrictions imposed by the federal grant are unambiguous: they state without exception that a project "may address issues of women's rights only within education." Defying this, both the conference (which featured speakers from the National Abortion Rights Action League, Ralph Nader's Congress Watch and other political groups) and the manual address women's issues beyond the scope of education, and also address economic issues beyond the scope of feminism. NSEF's WEEA-funded newsletters, "Cognition" and "Prerogative," share the same themes and stray

further from their authorized subject by focusing on the political issues surrounding continued federal funding.

The scope of "women's rights only within education" certainly excludes some political issues if the regulation is to have any meaning at all. NSEF's expansive view of WEEA's scope, however, permits no such exclusion. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), for instance, concerns matters both within and beyond education. Yet repeated endorsements of ERA appear in "Empowering Women," and also in "Cognition" and "Prerogative." Occasional efforts to address ERA only with respect to students--one article, for instance, bears the title "Students and the ERA"--fail to distinguish significantly the interests related and unrelated to education. In another case, NSEF uses a reference to the equity of sending women into battlefield combat to launch a plea for disarmament, a topic which clearly violates the guidelines that NSEF accepted when it received the taxpayers' money. NSEF further justifies including disarmament within the scope of educational equity by citing the competition between education and the military for federal funds. Such logic gives WEEA infinite scope.

NSEF's expansive view of the Women's Educational Equity Act prompts many of its publications to substitute general attacks on "the system" for substantive and specific analyses and recommendations. In the federally-funded "Empowering Women," for instance, a radical attorney, who insists that "most lawyers are like whores," comments:

If the ass is protecting the system, ass-kicking should be undertaken regardless of the sex, ethnicity, or charm of the ass involved.... We've got to stop sucking and begin to bite.... I know we're termites. But if all the termites got together, the house would fall down.

Some 23 pages of "Empowering Women" discuss the general state of the national economy, advocating stronger unions, more permissive welfare programs and other "progressive" policies which might motivate "socialist feminists" to "directly challenge the right of the ruling class to divide up the economic pie." The manual devotes fourteen pages to pro-abortion exhortations, another fourteen to the problems of rural women. Other ideological topics include genital mutilation in the Third World, lesbianism, pornography, product safety, and affirmative action in employment.

The newsletters "Cognition" and "Prerogative" emphasize many of the same subjects and also stress birth control. Some of these topics may relate indirectly to education, but none do so exclusively; they thus exceed WEEA's proper scope. Further, as WEEA projects expand beyond specific issues in educational equity, they are more likely to duplicate existing resources.

U.S. STUDENT ASSOCIATION

The ideological content of these pages parallels the outside work of NSEF and of the U.S. Student Association, its sibling group which receives extensive coverage in "Cognition." The groups participated in the anti-Reagan "Solidarity Day" and the June 12 anti-nuclear rallies in Manhattan. Human Events states that NSEF Director Downey has traveled to Moscow for USSA to discuss "struggles for peace, detente and disarmament," and that USSA vice chairman Pedro Rodriguez previously served as national secretary to the Young Workers Liberation League, reportedly an affiliate of the U.S. Communist Party. USSA has regularly sent representatives to the Communist International Union of Students and has received favorable treatment in the Soviet newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda. Mike Chapman, a student government leader at the University of Wisconsin, reports widespread concern over USSA's political bent. "Schools in California, Florida, Kansas and Nebraska have withdrawn or threatened to withdraw from USSA," he reports, "and we hope to follow them." Dan Duffy, another Wisconsin student government leader, expresses particular concern about USSA's cordial relations with the Student Council of the USSR.

The final 44 pages of "Empowering Women" consist of technical advice on such matters as leadership, coalition-building, fundraising and media relations. Over half of this section consists of NSEF reprints published before the WEEA grant. Most of this section has no particular relevance to sex equity, nor does a short reprint from Ms. Magazine on organizing women relate particularly to education. The majority of the literature addresses common-sense subjects such as the role of leaders ("leaders perform political, spiritual, and intellectual functions as well as managerial and group maintenance tasks"), the advantages of finding allies ("your overall power will come from the number of people you are able to mobilize") and the importance of clarifying goals ("never lose sight of the goal.... Your goal should be stated up front and throughout the planning and implementation of the action"). A brief article near the end of the section gives advice to those seeking federal grants.

Since the Reagan Administration began questioning the value of WEEA shortly after the NSEF project began, "Cognition" and "Prerogative" increasingly have published appeals for continued WEEA funding -- scarcely a legitimate topic for a publication funded by federal WEEA grants. Over half the WEEA-funded pages in "Cognition" urge public opposition to proposed cutbacks and legislative changes in WEEA and other women's laws. Substantial portions of "Prerogative" contain the same appeals, and also urge increases in federal grants and loans to higher education.

Aside from duplication and topicality, NSEF has other serious problems. It might have violated, for example, the WEEA regulation that "a grantee may not use its grantee [sic] to pay a project staff member for time or work which that staff member is compensated from some other source of funds." NSEF refuses to

divulge its own budget arrangements, so it is impossible to determine whether the organization mingles WEEA funds with other resources to develop a single product. The possibility arises, however, for a number of reasons: 1) USSA co-published "Empowering Women" and claims joint sponsorship of the WEEA project; 2) "Cognition" is actually a 12-page newsletter which typically devotes two pages to WEEA and the rest to other NSEF and USSA activities such as ratings of congressional voting records and legislative strategies; and 3) Downey serves as full-time president of NSEF as well as full-time director of the WEEA project. Ann Obuchowski, a former USSA staff member who now works for U.S. Senator Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.), indicates that the presidency of NSEF is a salaried position, but NSEF refuses to confirm this. After first refusing to discuss the matter, Downey denies receiving two salaries, and no evidence on this issue has become available.

It is difficult to field test NSEF's actual impact, since the organization refuses to reveal who attended its conference, who receives its publications or on which campuses it has been active. Downey, afraid of "witch-hunts and Red-baiting," keeps this information secret, and her subordinates follow her lead. Student leader Chapman suggests, however, that most of the students who attended the conference and who find themselves on the NSEF mailing lists have already been active in feminist causes and are therefore already familiar with NSEF's common-knowledge information.

CONCLUSION

The stated purpose of NSEF's WEEA grant was to train student leaders "to end sex discrimination on campuses." Is there any campus anywhere on which NSEF has had any impact on any specific sex discrimination problem? NSEF refuses to say. Obuchowski cannot think of any, and Chapman agrees that the grant has been "a waste and a failure." A survey of former USSA activists and student leaders in Kansas and Oregon also failed to uncover any specific accomplishments.

Part of the problem may arise from internal confusion within NSEF itself. In its grant application, NSEF listed high turnover among student government leaders as a major obstacle to localized sex equity efforts. Yet Downey is the third director of the WEEA project in less than two years, and several insiders report that NSEF itself is largely a one-person operation.

A permanent solution seems imminent, however, for the five WEEA-funded staffers at NSEF will soon relinquish their combined \$71,800 salary and the rest of their budget. The Reagan Administration has slated the project for zero funding in 1983.

Written at the request
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